The Case of OD in an NGO in India

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Abstract

This organizational development exercise was carried out in a prominent NGO that works in the area of rights and advocacy in the state of Jharkand in India. The OD exercise was part of the Applied Behavioral Science course of the first author's graduate program which required the application of behavioral science theory to a live organization under the supervision of her guide, the second author. The intervention proved to be quite an educative one, both because it was in the developmental sector posing a different set of challenges than conventional organizations and also because the organization itself was in a state of flux at the time of the intervention. The entire exercise was spread over a period of four months. This paper discusses some of the issues and improvement areas that emerged through interviews with senior management and also reflections on some of the key lessons learnt during the process of intervention, with implications for OD in developmental organizations.

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Introduction

Organization Development work has largely been done in business or for profit organizations. Bargal and Schmid (1992:2) refer to the paucity of literature on consultation done in developmental organizations when they point out to this 'shortage of theoretical and empirical studies dealing with organizational change and development in human service organizations'. OD in nonprofit organizations provides some unique challenges for the consultant that may not exist in business organizations (Ramos, 2007; Waysman & Savaya, 1997; Wheelan, Brunner, Burchill, Craig & Tillin, 1996). The organizational culture for most non profit organizations tends to be different from traditional organizations. The key difference between developmental organizations and commercial organizations has been cited as the centrality of values and ideology for developmental organizations (Edwards & Sen, 2000; Brown & Covey, 1987). The case of isolation of the differing programs and poor communication across the various units has been discussed by Ramos (2007) in his study of organizational change in a human services organization. Schnell (2005) points to the issue of moving beyond the leadership of an organizational founder and the challenges of rapid growth in his case study of a community outreach centre. The issues and concerns of such organizations could pose a different set of challenges to the OD consultant.

The relevance of OD in developmental organizations have been cited variously as increasing the capacity of the social change agencies to cope with organizational problems (Brown, Leach & Covey, 2004), or enhancing the climate, management or operations of the non profit agency (Ramos, 2007). Speaking of the consultant's role in developmental organizations, Ramos (2007) points that the organizational consultation

process employed could include assessment, feedback, and action planning components. Korten (1980) discusses the three stages of the learning process for a development organization as learning to be effective, learning to be efficient, and learning to expand. Although the role of OD can cut across the three stages, it may be most suited for the second stage, when the organization starts growing and would require the consultant's help to mature as an organization. This paper will examine the case of OD in a prominent NGO in the state of Jharkand in India, where many of the challenges facing a developmental organization mentioned in the literature and some others, come alive. Some of the author's personal learnings as well as implications for OD in developmental organizations will also be discussed.

About the Organization

Adhikar[3] (which stands for human rights) is a mass-based organization in the state of Jharkand in India that started in 1985 with the aim of altering society's power base towards the poor and the marginalized. Since its inception, Adhikar has worked alongside socially marginalized communities – primarily the tribal communities and other landless laborers spread in and around Jharkand with the intent to support organized action from within the community against any unjust distribution of wealth, resources or power. The founder Mr. Rajan Mishra sought to espouse the ideal of self-determination through organizing people into unions and other collectives to fight for their rights. The organization has grown from a few handful inspired by Mr. Mishra during the early days to over 200 employees. Mr. Mishra currently serves in a prominent position at the Center in the Government of India. He has chosen to dissociate himself from Adhikar so that he

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[3] The names of the organization and the various individuals have been disguised. However all the events and data are true.

is not perceived as aligned with any political party or he is not seen as doing favors to Adhikar.

Scope of Work of Adhikar

The differing areas of Adhikar's involvement are outlined in Figure 1. Adhikar first began its work through the Adivasi Sangathan[4] created to organize the tribal people into unions.
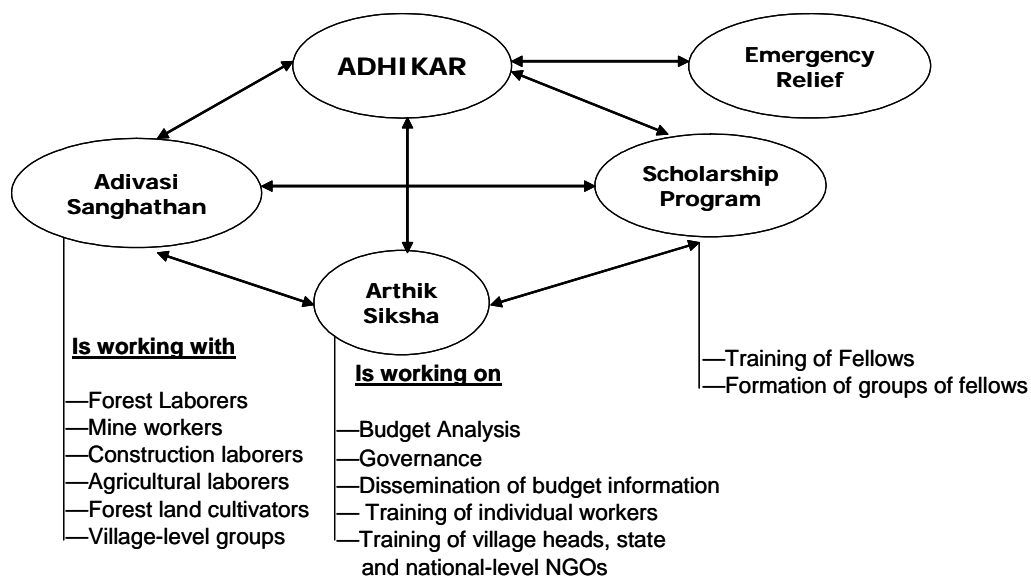

Figure 1: Adhikar's activities

Under the umbrella of the Adivasi Sangathan, other unions like the Agricultural Laborers' Union, Land Rights Protection Committee and the Construction Workers Union have evolved. Along with the unions, Adhikar also works in the area of budgetary analysis and expenditure monitoring for the state government through its wing called Arthik Siksha[5] which also conducts training programs for other NGOs of different states in classification and analysis of budgetary information. In addition there is a Scholarship

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[4] Sangathan is the local name for organization
[5] Arthik Siksha stands for financial education

program that seeks to fund and train local level leadership to raise issues and awareness at the village level. These fellows are funded by Adhikar and avail of a monthly stipend. They have the autonomy to form their own unions and serve as an extended network for Adhikar. The emergency response program of Adhikar encompasses relief work at times of calamities and distress.

Structure of the Organization

Adhikar is structured along both geography and programs. As the organization has grown, the structure of Adhikar too has evolved. The various unions such as Construction Workers Union, Adivasi Sangathan and programs such as Arthik Siksha and Scholarship program are overseen by different coordinators all reporting directly to the Managing Trustee, Mr. Mishra. In addition, there are location coordinators in Chaibasa, Ghatsila and Saraikela, which are districts in the state of Jharkand. There is considerable overlap between program and region. The coordinator of Chaibasa region, Ms. Devi, was among the first few members of Adhikar and was the Director of Adhikar at the time of the intervention. She was appointed the Managing Trustee by Mr. Mishra a week before the intervention ended. The structure of Adhikar showing differentiation by program and region along with the respective heads is shown in Figure 2 below.
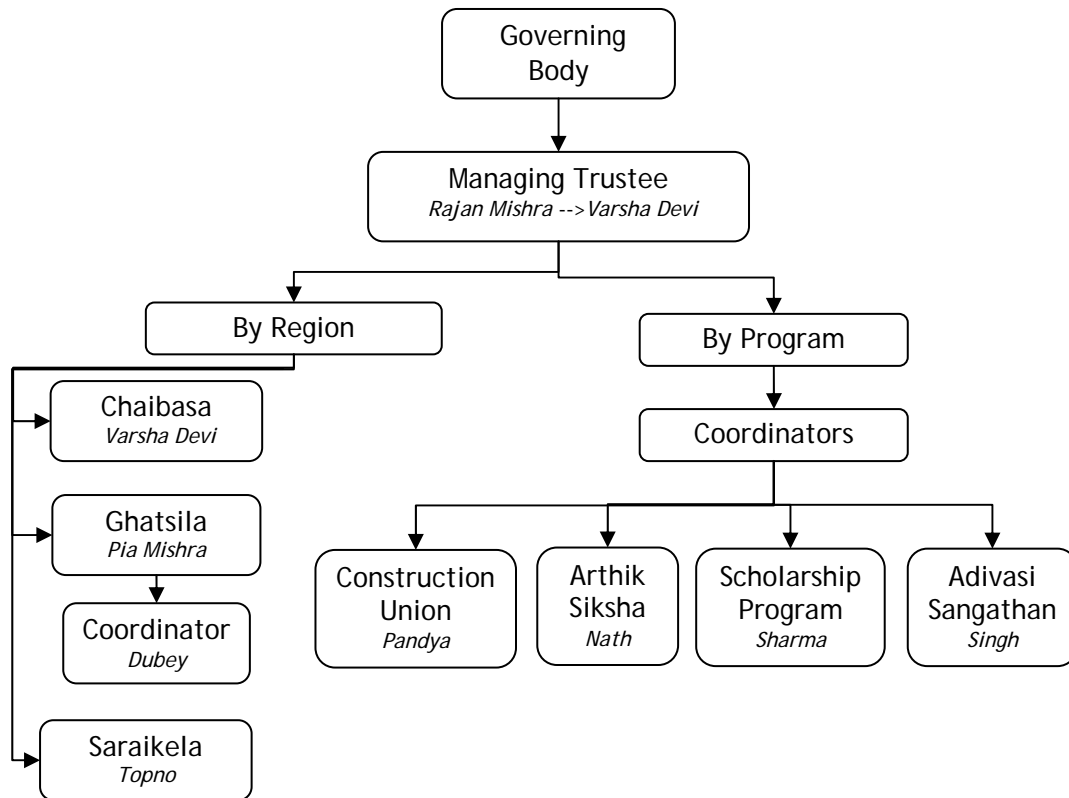
Figure 2: Structure of Adhikar showing differentiation by program and region

Organizational Entry – Engagement with Adhikar

The engagement with Adhikar began when the first author contacted Ms. Pia Mishra, who is the program director of Adhikar to seek permission for the engagement. Pia expressed interest in the project and welcomed the engagement. After the informal first meeting, a second meeting was arranged where both the authors met Pia at the Adhikar office to explain the nature of the intended engagement and seek permission for the first author to study the organization, conduct interviews and apply OD as and when required. The intent was to enter the organization, understand the nature of its work and functioning, collect data on the culture and other relevant information, and on the basis of the findings suggest some interventions for improvement or changes.

Methodology of the Study

The primary methodology of the study comprised of the following.

Interviews. The process followed was largely based on closed room interviews with each of the coordinators, usually lasting for 1-2 hours where the author first introduced herself and elaborated on the nature of her engagement and sought the views of those being interviewed regarding the organization, its culture, areas of concern, and any suggestions or other comments pertinent to the discussion. All the respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. It was made clear that the role of the author was to understand the functioning of the organization with a view towards diagnosing issues and recommending areas of improvement.

Field Visits. The author also visited the field in Ghatsila where she interacted with the field workers and the regional coordinator, Mr. Dubey. During this visit, she sat in on one of the regional meetings following which she had interviews with the field workers in small groups of four or five. This was done to understand the organization from the view of the fieldworkers and gain insight into its issues through their lens.

Memos and Reports. The initial familiarization with the organization and its activities came through a study of the various reports and manuals published. These included annual reports, budget analysis reports of Arthik Siksha, newspaper clippings on Adhikar and other documents relating to the organization. All this information was available in the library of Adhikar. The author spent several hours in the library, familiarizing herself with the organization and its history.

Observations. In addition to the interviews, the author also observed the non verbal cues, pattern of interaction and nature of relationships among members, indicative of the climate of the organization during her visits to the Adhikar head office and the field visit.

These observations continued beyond the course of the interviews to the time when she was sitting in on some of the meetings of the coordinators and her informal interaction with the members.

Diagnostic Presentation. Towards the end of the engagement, a session was held with all the coordinators present, where findings from the authors' engagement with the organization were presented to the members in a closed room group meeting. This served both as a mirroring (feedback) activity as well as a forum for initiating dialogue and communication across the organizational members.

Meeting with the Coordinators

The author first met with Ms. Pia Mishra who served as the point of contact throughout. Following this she met with each of the coordinators in turn, to get their perspective on the organization and the issues and concerns. Ms. Mishra (in charge of the Ghatsila region), Ms. Devi (director of Adhikar and in charge of Chaibasa region at the time of the intervention), Mr. Pandya (coordinator for the Construction Workers Union), Mr. Singh (coordinator for Adivasi Sangathan), Mr. Dubey (coordinator for Ghatsila), Mr. Nath (coordinator of Arthik Siksha), and Mr. Sharma (coordinator of Scholarship program), were among those who were interviewed in detail. Most of the issues and concerns surfaced through the sessions with the coordinators. While most coordinators opened up freely to discuss their concerns and the issues facing the organization, some like Ms. Devi and Mr. Sharma were less open and did not share much about their views on Adhikar and its functioning.

Most coordinators had been with the organization since its inception. All of them echoed a strong sense of identification and commitment to the organization and the cause it worked for. There was high regard for the founder Mr. Mishra. His daughter, Pia (the

authors contact) has had to prove herself in the organization. There were still some issues around the acceptance of Ms. Pia Mishra by all the coordinators. She is professionally qualified and actively working but she was being tested for her commitment to the organization and its work. However, what was interesting was also that during the author's meeting with Pia she never once mentioned the fact that she was the daughter of the founder, Mr. Mishra. The author came to know this only through others in later interviews.

Diagnosis

The issues that emerged through the sessions with the coordinators were analyzed using Weisbord's Six-Box Model (as cited in French& Bell, 2003) as shown in Figure 3 below.
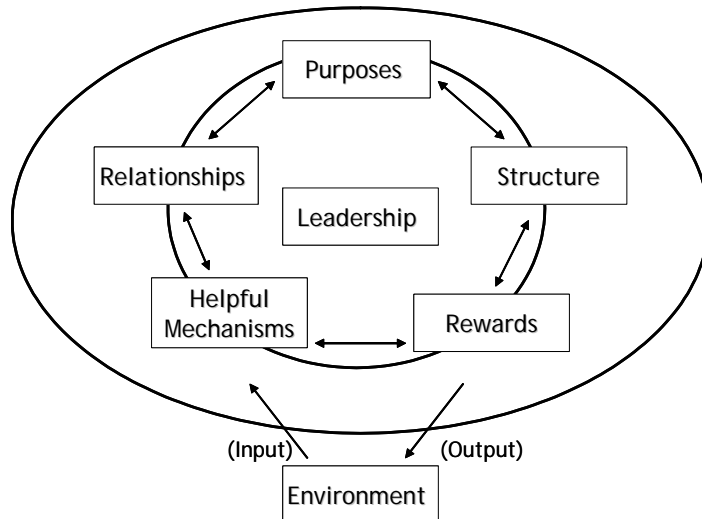
Figure 3: Weisbord's Six Box Model

Issues Relating to Structure

Lack of Clarity on Structure. There appeared to be a lack of clarity regarding the structure of Adhikar in the minds of not just the staff but even the coordinators. Some

clarity on the role of Pia was also sought by one of the coordinators at the time of the diagnostic presentation. The confusion over the structure existed primarily because of the organizational boundaries being both geographical and program driven. The resultant matrix structure caused confusion in clarifying reporting relationships. Since the organization is structured around programs such as Adivasi Sangathan, Construction Workers Union, Arthik Siksha and Scholarship on one hand and around region such as Ghatsila, Chaibasa and Saraikela on the other with separate coordinators for each, there was confusion regarding reporting relationships and authority. Instances were cited during the interviews when this matrix kind of structure caused misunderstanding or confusion regarding reporting relationships or precedence of command.

Centralization vs. Decentralization. To a large extent there was considerable autonomy and decentralization at the coordinator level in the organization. All the coordinators expressed their happiness in being given the responsibility and autonomy to work on the issues the way they saw fit for their differing units. The connecting link between them had been Mr. Mishra, the charismatic founder leader. In the absence of his regular engagement, there were gaps in communication and confusion over identity, operations, and means of operation. Some felt that the sense of responsibility and accountability that comes with empowerment was lacking in Adhikar. For example, Ms. Mistry echoed concerns regarding irregular reporting and documentation by some of the coordinators. The coordinating mechanisms such as periodic meetings among coordinators to make decentralization effective were absent. In such a scenario, the differing units seem to be operating in silos with little coordination and total absence of centralization at any level. The withdrawing of Mr. Mishra was seen as causing a vacuum of leadership in Adhikar. In the past his energy and vision had kept people tied, but in his absence there was not enough structure to bind the members of the organization.

Issues relating to Purpose

Agreement on Objectives. Largely there was agreement on the objectives of the organization as a rights based mass organization striving to facilitate social change through mobilization and advocacy. However some coordinators felt that they needed to be also working towards the development of the tribals. They felt the organization did not admit it but at many times was doing just that. The vision and future direction of Adhikar as either a rights based or both rights based and developmental or either of the two, did not have consensus among all the coordinators. The view posed by some was that it is time for Adhikar to foray into developmental work based on the understanding that much of the right based work had seen its culmination and the future lay in the area of developmental work. They felt it would make it easier for them to understand their own work and attract relevant resources if the purpose of the organization could be clarified.

Issues relating to Relationships

Lack of coordination. This is a theme that emerged as the most common through all the interviews. Almost all the coordinators thought that there was not enough coordination between them. Apparently the various units of Adhikar were performing their tasks well, but there was little sharing of information across the units. The high degree of decentralization at the coordinator level had granted a great degree of autonomy but the coordinating mechanisms were absent. There had been a noticeable decline over the years in the number of meetings or occasions when all the coordinators met, and many cited this as a reason for the disconnect they felt with Adhikar as a whole. This lack of coordination coupled with the matrix structure led to confusion about authority and roles.

Old vs. New. In talking to the coordinators some of whom had been with the organization since its inception and some who were relatively new, there appeared to be some lack of

trust between the two. The new in the organization felt their growth or initiatives were stymied by the old who appeared to be guarding their turfs. The new also did not feel welcome by the old. On the other hand, the old members in the organization felt that the new were ambitious and got right into the field without making an effort to understand the organization. It was felt that though this was a concern with only a few, it had the potential to grow and create further conflict if not properly addressed.

No proper induction for new employees. Tied in to the seeming gulf between the old and the new in the organization was the fact that the new entrants did not go through any formal socialization process upon entry. This was cited by one of the coordinators, which also manifested in a feeling of not being welcomed into the organization. Instances were mentioned when the new entrant had to go and seek information and figure things out for him/herself which further created a sense of dependence and feeling of isolation. The lack of a proper induction process appeared to have accentuated this gulf with the older members feeling that the new have been thrust upon them while the new were left with a sense of being unwelcome.

Issues relating to Leadership

Acceptability of Women Leaders. Ms. Devi had been with the organization since its inception and enjoyed support in her region. She was however based off Chaibasa. Pia, the daughter of Mr. Mishra had been with the organization for five years as the Program Director of Ghatsila. Both Ms. Devi and Pia were potential future leaders of Adhikar. However, they independently echoed reservations as potential next leaders and mentioned their gender as one of the reasons. They felt that the other male coordinators and the community they served may not be ready for a female leader. They also felt that it was

almost impossible to step into the shoes of the very charismatic Mr. Mishra. However in discussions with most of the other coordinators, the authors got the sense that they were open to having a woman leader. They were keen to know who was going to be the next leader and wanted this to happen quickly. They felt that many of the coordination issues and problems would get addressed if a new leader was appointed[6].

Next rung of leaders after a charismatic founding leader. Adhikar had a very charismatic leader in Mr. Mishra. A number of those who were associated with Adhikar had been attracted by his personal charisma and felt committed to him. After Mr. Mishra's active involvement in politics, his association with Adhikar on a regular basis had diminished. This created a leadership vacuum. Many in the organization exhibited an inability to think beyond Mr. Mishra as their leader. The organization seemed to be facing a crisis in terms of a leader who could command the same level of respect and following among the masses and the coordinators. There was a dearth of second level leaders in the organization and Mr. Mishra still appeared to be the de facto leader, at least in the minds of organizational members at the time of the intervention. Even though towards the end of the intervention, Ms. Devi was appointed the new Managing Trustee, during the earlier meetings and in the eyes of others she was a shadow of Mr. Mishra and a surrogate leader for Pia, the daughter of Mr. Mishra. Pia appeared to be the chief decision maker. She operated from the headquarters while Ms. Devi preferred to work from her Chaibasa location. In our interactions it was felt that Ms. Devi was very committed to Mr. Mishra but lacked the vision, the energy needed to lead a highly motivated team and serve the interests of the entire community. She may have been a good worker but lacked creative abilities and an inclusive mindset. Ms. Devi had not been very forthcoming in the

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[6] The day of the final presentation to the Adhikar team the authors were told that Ms. Devi had been appointed the new Managing Trustee.

interview and was not too accommodating of the diverse views that were expressed during the diagnostic presentation meeting. The new leader appeared to be in stark contrast to the charismatic leadership of Mr. Mishra. The leadership issue is a classic problem (Ramos, 2007; Schnell, 2005) whenever a charismatic leader moves on and his/her shoes have to be filled.

Issues relating to Rewards

Differential Pay. Adhikar started out as a rights-based organization. Most of the experienced and older employees chose to work for it due to their dedication to the original cause. Even the younger generation, which was better trained professionally, voiced concerns over the current remuneration and facilities. The newer employees were getting paid higher. The perks or facilities granted to some of the coordinators were perceived to be discriminatory and was a source of discontent among the older members.

Issue of Security. Being a developmental organization that has to depend on external funding many a time, the issue of job security and continued association with Adhikar was a matter of concern to some. With Mr. Mishra's lesser involvement there was a palpable fear that Adhikar may close shutters some day. The view expressed was that some form of assurance from the leadership for the continuity or clarity on the future of Adhikar may ease the sense of insecurity.

Issues relating to other Helpful Mechanisms

Role of Reporting. There were some concerns on the irregularity of reporting by some of the coordinators. That reporting and attending to administrative tasks serves as a helpful mechanism was not disputed, however the tardiness of some coordinators to turn in reports on their progress was also tied in to the issue of leadership and authority. Most

coordinators in the past had reported on a regular basis verbally to Mr. Mishra, who was able to fill in gaps of information whenever required for other coordinators. Thus the formal system of submitting and reading others reports had never been emphasized.

Diagnostic Presentation Meeting

Based on the diagnosis and analysis of the issues, it was decided to have a mirroring (feedback) session with all the coordinators. Since one of the most important issues was the lack of coordination or communication between the coordinators, this meeting was also intended to be a platform to initiate dialogue and communication at the coordinator level. Pia arranged for the diagnostic presentation and informed all the coordinators about the session. Around this time, a change that took place in the organization was the appointment of Ms. Devi by the board of trustees as the Managing Trustee in place of Mr. Mishra. The authors were informed of this change just prior to the diagnostic presentation.

The meeting was attended by five of the eight coordinators. In the beginning, the first author presented her findings (as have been presented in the earlier part of this paper). The slide explaining the differentiation by program and geography invited most comments, with organizational members unclear or divided in their interpretation of the structure. There was some ambiguity about the role of Pia too, with questions being asked if she was a coordinator or a region in charge. Although this line of discussion and debate didn't get resolved it pointed out to the group an area of concern.

However, there was an apparent reluctance on the part of the newly elected Ms. Devi to acknowledge the issues that were being presented. She engaged very little and when she did it was mostly to refute the existence of many of the findings even though they were being openly played out before her eyes at the time of the meeting, such as the

lack of clarity on structure or poor communication and coordination across the coordinators. Further, there was a visible divide between the coordinators, with seating designed to separate and crystallize the distinction. Pia and Ms. Devi sat on one side of the room along with the authors and the other coordinators sat on the other side of the room. This was also indicative of the power distance between the two groups. The role of verbal and non-verbal exchanges in establishing and defining the boundaries of engagement and behavior were also made obvious in this session.

What was also interesting was the lack of involvement of some of the coordinators during the session. Though they had been very open and vociferous during the individual meetings, when their point of view was presented or negated by Ms. Devi, they would not speak up. Rather they would also join in the say that the issue was not serious or it was non-existent. For example, poor coordination among the coordinators and the lack of meetings for dialogue and sharing at the coordinator level was an issue that almost all the coordinators cited in the individual meetings, but when Ms. Devi denied the existence of such an issue, it was not countered by any of the coordinators present. This could possibly be due to the fear of antagonizing the power centers in the organization or from a fear of being labeled the dissident camp. It could also be a function of high power distance (Hofstede, 1983) among Indians, resulting in a reluctance to be openly critical of superiors.

Though the meeting could not resolve any of the issues, this session to some extent was successful in bringing the coordinators together and sparking off discussion and debate in areas of concern and potential improvement zones. For an organization where various groups had been operating in increasing silos with the divide never openly acknowledged and where the coordinators had not sat down together in years beyond the annual meeting, this itself was a beginning. While the authors were able to diagnose the

leadership vacuum, there was little they could do given they were unable to meet with Mr. Mishra and Ms. Devi's refusal to engage effectively in the final presentation. Further, due to the limited time available for the engagement it was left to the organization to follow up on the issues and findings. A report summarizing the findings and observations was presented to the management.

This intervention presented a novel opportunity for the first author to enter an organization of her choice and understand the issues involved and apply the learnings of OD to the field. Some of the personal learnings and reflections about the intervention are provided in the next section.

Lessons from the Intervention

Capturing data without appearing intrusive. In her initial meetings, the first author noticed that whenever she started taking notes the interviewees tended to be a little more reluctant to divulge information, especially if they were discussing sensitive issues. For her future interviews she chose to capture what transpired during the sessions after the interviews, refraining from taking notes so the interviewee was not too conscious or inhibited in discussing the issues. What she learned was that people tend to open up more easily if there are no visible forms of record keeping so that they do not feel they will be held to what they say at a later date. Not taking notes or recording helped to build a comfortable non intrusive atmosphere during the interviews. However it increases the responsibility of the consultant to record the main issues immediately after the discussion. To cut down losses of information, the author would write down very briefly the main points during the interview. When the interviewee was talking about something sensitive/confidential the author would only listen and note down the essence later.

The need to be non aligned to any camp. The author was made aware of how she may be viewed by the interviewees in one of her not too productive interviews. Try as she might, she couldn't get one of the coordinators to open up. On analysis and reflection it was clear that it was because she had mentioned that she had met with Pia before the interview and alluded to her more than once during the course of the session. Since he was not too happy with Pia (something we figured later), he was being non cooperative during the interview because he viewed the author as aligned to Pia's camp. This was an important learning from this interview which underlined the importance of appearing impartial in order to establish trust with the interviewee.

The role of interviewer's own biases. Before the author met with one of the coordinators, she had heard of him from the other interviewees and had formed a preconception of him as a trouble maker. She started out being a little defensive and aggressive with him, however, during the actual interview, she was surprised to find him forthright and very nice. The author had a sense that she had been unfair in judging him before the interview. The session with this particular coordinator also forced her to examine the role of biases in the interviewer and the need to keep an open mind.

The importance of clarifying the consultant's role at the onset itself. In her interview with Ms. Devi who was then the Director of Adhikar, the manner in which the interview proceeded revealed the importance of clarifying the role of the consultant at the onset itself. The author had met with Ms. Devi on an earlier occasion when she was unable to give her time and by the time the interview was scheduled she had had a number of interviews and was quite familiar with most of the coordinators. So when she met with Ms. Devi she didn't spend too much time discussing her role and the purpose of the interview. However as the interview progressed, she sensed that Ms. Devi was reluctant to discuss any of the issues and kept insisting all was well with Adhikar. It almost seemed

like she was putting up a good front for Adhikar's sake before the media. After around one hour with her, the author was beginning to tire and tried explaining her role once again. She reiterated that she was only interested in diagnosing issues faced by Adhikar in its functioning; in the capacity of a facilitator and that whatever would be found would be confidential. She sensed a change in Ms. Devi's attitude sometime after that. She appeared to relax and was a little more open in admitting to some of the issues. Even though Ms. Devi wasn't particularly involved or open in the later group meeting too, this particular interview made the author realize that she should have spent time to clear her role and the nature of the interview instead of taking it for granted that interviewee would be familiar with it. The importance of a good introduction that elaborates the role and expectations was made apparent through this interview.

The importance of getting the leadership involved. During the time of the author's engagement with Adhikar, Mr. Mishra was not actively involved in Adhikar's activities owing to his political involvement. The author's point of contact was Ms. Pia Mishra from the beginning and a meeting with Mr. Mishra could not be arranged due to his other commitments. The issue of a leadership vacuum came up often during the interviews. The authors had brainstormed about how the organization should restructure and handle some of the issues; however, there was not much they could do without the active engagement of the top leadership. Due to the peculiar circumstance of the organization being in a transition period with a change of leadership, the authors did not get an opportunity to fully engage with the top leader during the diagnosis. Thus, though important issues surfaced, the new leader was not ready to take them further with the authors at that juncture. The importance of the top leaders buy in for the success of any organization development initiative served an important lesson.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to address the gap in the literature regarding developmental work in non government or human service organizations. Many of the issues and concerns addressed in this paper are not peculiar to non profit organizations, but are germane to business organizations too. However, in developmental organizations the top management and many of the senior members are driven towards serving the societal purpose passionately. The passion which provides the motivation also blinds people towards the importance of the internal working such as structure or coordination mechanisms for the health of the organization in the long run. The lack of attention to organizational structure is made worse as these issues do not immediately reflect on the performance of the organization, but if left untended, could be fatal for the health of the organization. The role of an outside neutral observer such as the consultant becomes all the more valuable in developmental organizations to introduce an element of rationality in the diagnosis of otherwise neglected issues and alert the organization to potentially damaging consequences of ignoring certain issues in the long run.

The developmental organization studied proved to be quite an interesting one where many of the organizational issues faced by developmental organizations as indicated in the literature, such as moving beyond the founder, or poor communication and coordination came to the fore. The issues of structure and the challenges facing a growing organization were amply made evident in this case. This intervention although limited in scope in terms of working with the client, provided an ideal opportunity for organizational diagnosis. From the point of view of the first author's exposure to the field, it served as an invaluable experience both for the scope and the depth of issues covered.

In addition the intervention allowed for some very basic yet important lessons for the consultant that is relevant for any OD work.

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